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Belonging and its frames: Rural employers' boundary construction concerning immigrant employees

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Abstract

Rural employers can be significant actors in defining who is welcomed to the local community and under which conditions. Despite their importance, however, the role of rural employers in the belonging process of immigrant employees is not widely known. In this study, we focused on the discursive boundaries that rural employers (re)produce when speaking about immigrant employees. The empirical data of our study consists of 35 interviews in small and medium-sized enterprises. We identified three frames within which employers' carry out boundary work. These frames are dealing with work ethics, workplace rules and local community. We argue that belonging was constructed in these frames ambiguously, and highlight immigrants' hard-working attitude, cultural discretion and local stability. We also found that the idea of belonging was not built solely on immigrants' adaptation but that conventional boundaries were also flexible.

KEYWORDS

belonging, boundaries, employers, immigrant worker, rural

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INTRODUCTION

Immigration is a familiar phenomenon in many rural areas, where people with different backgrounds settle down in new places due to globalisation and restructuring of rural economies (Dufty-Jones, 2014). As Woods (2016) states, rural areas are cosmopolitan and economically and socially connected to other parts of the world, which means that these areas are mobile rather than stable (Bell & Osti, 2010; Hedberg & do Carmo, 2012; Pereira & Oiarzabal, 2018), and diverse (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014). However, immigration to rural areas is not necessarily a painless process, as a strong sense of conformity may require immigrants to adapt to the local culture and social practices (Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Zahl-Thanem & Haugen, 2019). Despite being integrated into labour markets and being familiar to the community, immigrants might remain outsiders from local social networks (Aure et al., 2018; McAreavey & Krivokapic-Skoko, 2019; Membretti & Lucchini, 2018; Stachowski, 2020). As Hayfield and Schug (2019) state, even though immigrants might be locally accepted, lack of historical family relations and social networks can place them in a position in which they are considered 'familiar strangers' and outsiders. Thus, strict local practices and values can create new regional social divisions (Rye, 2018), and furthermore challenge belonging, especially as both informal and formal networks are important for the settlement and belonging process (McAreavey & Argent, 2018; Moris, 2020).

In this study, we examine belonging produced in rural employers' discourses. Negotiations of inclusion, exclusion and belonging take place in rural areas when people who live in a certain area have to define new meanings for the changing environment. Several studies have examined immigrant employees' perspectives in rural context (e.g., Rye, 2014; Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010;) as well as the perspectives of both employers and employees (e.g., Jentsch et al., 2007; Rogaly, 2008). However, less attention has been given to rural employers' perceptions of immigrant workers (for an exception see Kasimis et al., 2010; Lämsä et al. 2019; Lähdesmäki & Suutari, 2020) or the employer's role in the belonging process. This is an obvious deficiency because in many rural areas, immigrants are already part of rural communities and an increasingly important labour force in rural businesses. The idea of immigrants' successful integration is strongly connected to work and their position in the labour market (Forsander, 2004). Many rural entrepreneurs employ immigrants due to a lack of a local workforce, and this has opened up new ways of interaction between immigrants and local inhabitants. The workplace can sometimes be the only place where different individuals and groups get to know each other. However, simultaneously the workplace can be a place of exclusion (Aure et al., 2018).

The objective of this study is to examine belonging through the frames that rural employers use when they speak about immigrant employees. We use the concept of boundaries as a theoretical framework. In the same way as McAreavey and Krivokapic-Skoko (2019) argue in their study of integration in the context of the rural labour market; we suggest that boundaries are a useful tool for examining and revealing the very complex nature of belonging in the context of rural working life. Although boundaries are not a widely used tool for examining social interaction in rural areas (for an exception, see de Lima, 2012; McAreavey & Krivokapic-Skoko, 2019), we suggest that examining belonging through boundaries can offer a new and nuanced insight into social interaction in working life in rural areas. Thus, our research questions are: (1) What kind of boundaries do rural entrepreneurs create when they speak about immigrant employees? (2) How do these boundaries define (prevent or enable) immigrants' belonging to local communities? We are interested in how belonging is discursively produced through different boundaries and how entrepreneurs make sense of the world around them and define meanings for immigrant employees' belonging (Antonsich, 2010).

Local entrepreneurs are important actors in rural areas. Rural companies are locally embedded, which means that they have significant potential to affect local people's attitudes towards immigrant employees (Lämsä et al., 2019). Thus, employers can play an important role as community leaders. Previous research further suggests that for a rural small business, hiring immigrants can in some cases be a decision that entrepreneurs have to justify locally (Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2020), which means that the recruitment decision can be a certain kind of statement in itself, which changes the local landscape and the usual way of living. Entrepreneurs can operate as local gatekeepers who can help immigrants become part of wider social networks. Despite their local importance, research on rural entrepreneurs' perspective of the belonging process is lacking. Accordingly, our study contributes to the discussion on rural immigration by demonstrating that employers' boundary work produces different conditions for belonging, which can be either inclusive or exclusive. We argue that through boundaries, employers produce certain frames for belonging by highlighting immigrants' attitude as hard workers, their local stability or their cultural discretion. We also found that the employers did not build belonging solely on the basis of immigrants' adaptation, but boundaries were also flexible.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this article, our focus is on the context of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). In SMEs, social relations between the employer and employees may be tighter than in bigger firms because entrepreneurs are often part of everyday working life and regularly meet employees face-to-face (Spence, 1999). Besides, rural SMEs are often strongly embedded in local communities and part of local networks in various ways (Bosworth, 2012; Lähdesmäki & Suutari, 2012). Accordingly, social proximity, which means kinship and friendship with community members, is an important aspect of the operations of many rural SMEs. All these aspects can affect the belonging process of immigrant employees. SMEs represent an important environment in which immigrant employees can experience inclusion or exclusion, and this can also have far-reaching effects on the local community. When we examine how belonging is constructed, we use the concept of boundaries as a theoretical tool because different boundaries between people form the nature of belonging.

We consider belonging to be a process that is produced in the interaction between individuals and groups (Chin, 2019; Huot et al., 2014). Belonging and connection with other people is an integral part of an individual's well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and can be defined as emotional attachment, a feeling of being at home, understood and safe (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Ignatieff, 1995; Antonsich, 2010). May (2013, p. 3) states that: 'We come to understand who we are partly on the basis of where and with whom we belong, which is why belonging is of fundamental importance to the self' and furthermore: 'Thus, an individual's sense of belonging is affected by collectively negotiated understandings of who "we" are and what "we" stand for, and who gets excluded as the "other" '. Belonging requires other people to think that a person belongs with them (Simonsen, 2018). In order to belong, the other group members have to see the person as part of the group, and simultaneously the person has to recognise that he or she is a part of that particular group (Chin, 2019). According to Antonsich (2010), belonging is a discursive resource that constructs, justifies, claims and resists socio-spatial inclusion or exclusion (politics of belonging). Similarly, Yuval-Davis (2006) states that belonging includes the 'politics of belonging', which is constructed in particular collectivities and is maintained by different boundaries. These boundaries define who stands inside and who stands outside the boundary line, and whether the person is part of 'us' or 'them'.

Social boundaries are important in the context of ethnicity (Barth, 1969). Group boundaries are constructed in social-structural, cultural and legal institutions, together with immigrants' histories and characteristics (Alba, 2005). Zolberg and Long (1999) state that even though boundary work is a mutual process in which immigrants and locally born residents are part of the process, and power relations are not equal because negotiations are conducted in the host country. For example, values and traditions are institutionalised, which benefits local inhabitants. Boundaries play a significant role in the process in which individuals gain the same opportunities as the majority. Nevertheless, boundaries need not be stable, but they can be transferred, and people can shift their positions in relation to them (Alba, 2005).

Lamont and Molnár (2002) make a distinction between symbolic and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions by which social actors categorise objects, people, practices, space and time. By contrast, social boundaries emerge in the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Institutionalised (social) boundaries operate at the macro level and interact with symbolic boundaries. At the workplace, these micro-level symbolic boundaries are produced in the social interaction, which affects the crossing, blurring or shifting of boundaries.

The boundary between natives and immigrants can be formed in different ways, depending on the boundary work. Bauböck (1994) speaks about boundary crossing, which he defines as an individual's re-socialisation in the new host country. Re-socialisation can come close to assimilation into a new culture, even though (Bauböck, 1994, p. 12) continues that: 'one could distinguish between re-socialisation in the sense of learning a new language and acquiring practical experience with the institutions of the receiving state on the one hand, and cultural assimilation in the sense giving up previous loyalties and affiliations on the other hand'. Boundary crossing means that a person moves from one group to another, but the boundary does not change (Zolberg & Long, 1999). According to Bauböck (1994), boundaries become blurred when a society as a whole becomes more pluralistic because of immigration. Boundaries are also blurred when the receiving society's structures change and the society becomes tolerant of different group memberships. Bilingualism and dual citizenship are examples of this (Zolberg & Long, 1999). Besides, Zolberg and Long (1999) boundary shifting is one more element of boundary work. When a boundary shifts, it is positioned in a new way, and a group's identity is created in a new way as well. Those previously defined as non-group members can now become group members (Zolberg & Long, 1999).

Wimmer (2008) develops the idea of boundary work related to ethnic boundaries even further with more detailed subdivisions. He defines boundary shifting as changing boundaries' locations by 'expanding' or 'contracting' inclusion areas. Similarly, crossing happens when attempts are made to modify a boundary's meaning by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories (normative inversion). 'Blurring' happens when ethnicity is de-emphasised and other social divisions are emphasised and when a person's own position shifts in relation to the boundary (positional moves). According to Alba (2005), boundaries can be either bright or blurred. Bright boundaries have no uncertainty about group membership, but the person knows whether he or she is part of a certain group. Boundaries are blurred when a person's position in relation to the boundary is unclear. A person can simultaneously be a member of different groups and can cross the boundary line in different situations.

Previous studies have examined boundaries from several perspectives, for instance, language and religion (Zolberg & Long, 1999), rural labour markets (McAreevey & Krivokapic-Skoko, 2019), or by comparing boundaries in different European countries (Bail, 2008) and examining boundaries' significance for second-generation immigrants' experiences of belonging to a nation

(Simonsen, 2018). These are all important contributions, but the research focus has not been on discourses, which are one context in which boundaries are maintained and negotiated (Getrich, 2008; Nevins, 2010). As Nevins (2010, p. 119) argues: 'language has a power of its own: the language we use in public discourse both helps to shape and reflects our ways of seeing and being'. This article regards local people and immigrant employees as two groups that have discursively produced and maintained a boundary between themselves. Employers engage in boundary work, which is an effort of discursively maintaining, negotiating and defining boundaries between local people and immigrant employees. Through this, employers produce subject positions for immigrant employees, which may have an effect on their experiences of belonging. In our study, we suggest that employers use different discursive tools when they position immigrant employees and sometimes themselves in relation to a boundary.

EMPIRICAL METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study was conducted in Finland, where the proportion of people living in rural areas is above the average of the European Union 28 Member States (Eurostat, 2020; OECD, 2008). For a long time, Finland has been a country of emigration rather than one of immigration. Immigration started to grow during the 1990s and the EU enlargement in 2004 especially increased labour-related mobility. In Finland, at the national political level, the attitude towards work-related immigration has been positive, especially in the 21st century. Immigrants have been considered as one solution to the labour shortage caused by the ageing population and low fertility rate. Similar to rural Europe in general, there has been an increasing need for flexible and low-wage immigrant labour because of changed industrial structures and labour markets (Rye, 2020; Rye & Scott, 2018). In Finland, immigrants mainly live in bigger towns, especially in the Helsinki metropolitan area, where the percentage of persons born abroad was 12.1% in 2018. In rural areas, people with a foreign background is 2.6%, even though in some individual rural municipalities, the number of immigrants can be quite high. Approximately 11% of the population with a foreign background, which is 42,000 people, live in Finnish rural areas (Juopperi, 2019; Statistics Finland, 2019).

The empirical data of our study consist of 35 interviews at SMEs that operate in rural Finland and have employed immigrant employees. We define an SME here as an enterprise with fewer than 250 employees and an annual turnover of €50 million or less (European Commission, 2003). SMEs are a significant part of the Finnish economy because 99.7% of Finnish enterprises have fewer than 250 employees (Statistics Finland, 2018). In addition, two-thirds of Finnish enterprises' branches are located in rural areas (Työ-ja elinkeinoministeriö, 2015, p. 88).

We gathered the data in the autumn of 2016 in different parts of Finland (in 12 Finnish regions out of 18, and in 28 municipalities). Our research group contacted the interviewees mainly by first emailing and then phoning them. We first asked whether the employers had an experience of employing immigrants, and then selected those who did for the interviews. The interviews were held on the spot at the enterprises' premises and lasted approximately an hour. The data were gathered using a stimulus-based interview method. Stimulus-based interviews can contain, for example, pictures, claims or news, by which a research theme is examined. The stimulus presents one interpretation of the study theme, and the interviewees create a new interpretation of it. This enables the interviewees to express their social experiences and cultural knowledge of the research topic (Törrönen, 2002). Characteristics of a stimulus-based interview method are that it allows the examination of rather sensitive topics as stimuli and let respondents speak freely and provoke spontaneous reactions to the research topic (e.g., Törrönen, 2002). We showed the employers

different stimuli, such as pictures, quotes and claims, concerning immigrant employees and their requirement process, reasons to recruit immigrant workers, immigrants' significance for the enterprise and local labour market. Besides, we showed claims and quotes concerning immigrant employees' skills, work attitude, how their skills are utilised, and potential problems concerning the law, local community and integration. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The majority of the interviewees were owners of business enterprises (28). Other positions were production manager (3), human resources manager (3) and deputy managing director (1). In our data, (apart from an entrepreneurial family) the smallest enterprise had one employee and the biggest had 175 employees. In addition, many enterprises had a seasonal workforce and almost every employer had several years of experience of employing immigrants. The interviewed SMEs represented several different branches of industry, for example, fabricated metal products, crop and animal products, textiles, food products, and plastic and concrete products. Some SMEs also represented the fruit and vegetable retail trade. Diversity of branches illustrate, how immigrant employees are part of the labour market in different sectors in rural areas, not only agriculture, similar to what Kasimis et al. (2010) have observed. In this study, the majority of the immigrant employees worked in rather physically demanding or monotonous work (food processing, building, harvesting, transporting and service industry). However, some of the immigrants were employed in professional positions (e.g., supervision position, marketing, product development).

Not only the enterprises but also immigrant employees' backgrounds varied. In this study, we define an immigrant as a person who has come to Finland from another country and who is not an 'ethnic Finn' (see Lämsä et al., 2019). Based on the information received from the employers, the immigrant employees came from 35 different countries, mostly from Estonia, Poland, Ukraine and Thailand. According to the employers, the immigrant workers had come to Finland for different reasons, for example, as work-related immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers or because of marriage. Thus, compared to the past, today's migrant groups are not internally homogenous, but reasons for moving to rural areas are various (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). This means that the interviewed employers spoke about very diverse immigrant employees. Similarly, immigrant employees came to the enterprises through different routes. Some employers used agencies in Finland and abroad for recruiting employees, whereas others recruited their labour force directly. Some entrepreneurs travelled abroad themselves to recruit employees. In some cases, the employees themselves were active and asked for work directly from the enterprises. Sometimes the immigrants' own networks were significant recruitment channels.

We started our data analysis by reading through all the interviews, after which we categorised and coded the data using the terms that the interviewees had used when they constructed a picture of immigrant workers. We scrutinised the terms from the perspective of boundary work. We focused on, for instance, how the interviewees positioned immigrant employees, how they constructed exclusion and inclusion or similarities and differences, and which words they used to describe immigrant employees or different immigrant groups. We searched discursive boundaries and examined what kinds of frames the employers constructed for immigrant employees' belonging. In other words, our analysis was data-based, but we continuously mirrored it in our theoretical framework of boundaries. We wanted to find the boundaries that employers produced in their narratives. Eventually, we identified three meta-frames dealing with work ethics, workplace rules and the local community. We then examined in more detail the kind of boundary work the employers practised within these three frames and named them accordingly. Finally, we examined in more detail the kind of boundary work the employers practised within these three frames.

HARD-WORKING IMMIGRANT EMPLOYEES AS ‘US’

In the first discursive frame, work ethics was an essential discursive resource, by which employers (re)produced boundaries at the workplace. Accordingly, the employers described immigrants as ‘good workers’ who have a ‘hard-working attitude’ and a strong ‘work ethic’. Describing immigrants as willing and good workers is not a new discovery and several previous studies have recognised this same phenomenon and elaborated critically on its different aspects (e.g., Findlay et al., 2013; MacKenzie & Forde, 2009; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). Rye and Scott (2018), for example, state that for employers, immigrants are an attractive labour option because of their flexibility: Employers not only have a quantitative need due to a labour shortage but a need for employees who have certain sought-after qualities. In our data, good work ethics emerged as one of these sought-after qualities in the descriptions of immigrant employees through terms such as ‘willingness to work hard’, ‘motivated’ and ‘flexible’.

— they are so ready to work when there is work available, they don’t start saying I’m not coming then or I’m not coming that time and I’m not coming to the evening shift because I want to do a morning shift. Yeah, they come to work when there is work. That’s the attitude. [—] and the attitude is that the most important thing is not to leave, or to have coffee and lunch breaks, but the work itself is important, it’s done well and above all, it is probably part of their culture that work is done well and for that you get recognition and pleasure too. (Int. 08)

Immigrant employees’ superior work attitude was highlighted by comparing them with unemployed Finns in general or local youths, who were not considered willing to work in rural enterprises. Thus, the label ‘Finnish origin’ partly lost its significance when the hard-working attitude exceeded the Finnish background or formal education. By categorising immigrant employees in relation to unemployed Finns, the employers drew a normative boundary between these two groups. By describing immigrant employees as hard-working, the employers constructed and strengthened the boundary between immigrant employees and unemployed Finns. Individuals were positioned on one side or other of the boundary, depending on how hard-working they were considered to be. Hard-working immigrant employees were thus categorised as part of ‘us’. Immigrant employees had a desirable attitude and the group was included inside the belonging circle, whereas the other group, unemployed Finns, was alienated. The following quote illustrates this division:

[—] among Finns, the attitude has become lazy. And demands have risen, so that some young Finnish fellow coming straight from school or a student who has just graduated into working life, their wishes and goals, for example, concerning salary, they are very high—. (Int. 12)

When we scrutinised our data further, we observed that boundary work was not only carried out between native Finns and immigrants but also between different immigrant groups. The idea of a ‘good worker’ was strengthened by highlighting ethnicity, which made the representation of a good worker more nuanced. This was done by describing the countries from which the most hard-working people came. Some nationalities were mentioned as the most desirable because of their attitude towards work. In other words, the boundary construction was similar to that between unemployed Finns and immigrant employees. By creating boundaries based on country of origin,

the employers aimed to clarify who belonged to 'us'. Groups that were seen the most positive and the most familiar were the Ukrainians, the Estonians and the Polish. As the next quote illustrates, the Ukrainians' attitude towards work felt familiar to the Finnish employer:

But in some ways Ukrainians' mentality is close to what we Finns have, and then even if they know that they are highly educated, the work is their value, no matter what the work is. They are not picky. That is very good. (Int. 10)

Our data had no clear consensus on which ethnicities were the most unwanted in Finnish enterprises. Rather, the boundary was reconstructed through positivity, by praising certain ethnicities for their work attitude. However, some employers mentioned that employees with Somali and Middle East backgrounds did not easily fit in with Finnish working life. Again, the evaluation of belonging was based on the attitude towards work. By making divisions according to countries of origin, the interviewees produced boundaries between different ethnic groups:

It is, it is, nationality somehow stands out there, so that if there are Turkish or Russians or others, they have a different culture of doing [—] For them doing your job well is a matter of honour, but for a Somali it may feel like a necessary evil. So, there is a big cultural difference and I would claim that it is a cultural difference. (Int. 08)

The boundary shifted from the individual level to one involving social structures when some employers started to talk about asylum seekers. We gathered our data in 2016, at which time the European refugee situation was topical. We did not specifically ask about asylum seekers, but a few employers brought the topic up themselves. In the work ethics frame, asylum seekers' position was ambiguous. Employers constructed them as a potential workforce and evaluated them on the basis of their work ability. Nevertheless, bureaucracy was created as a boundary between employers and asylum seekers. In Finland, asylum seekers receive permission to work 3 to 6 months after arriving in the country. Thus, in relation to asylum seekers, the boundary remained ambiguous because the predominant structure prevented asylum seekers from demonstrating their attitude towards work. In the next quote, an interviewee describes a situation in which asylum seekers arrive in Finland and spend long periods in reception centres in isolation, with no contacts with local employers. Physical isolation and inability to work were constructed as elements by which asylum seekers were estranged from immigrants who are able to work:

— I think, I am thinking with horror that first they have to be so and so long in Finland before they can even go to work, that they have to first laze around a year or whatever, study Finnish. Well, at school you study Finnish, I mean, you learn better here in working life. My Bulgarian worker came to us yesterday evening and tomorrow morning he is working, which means that you don't think about integration much in that. (Int. 14)

The striking element in this frame was how the employers evaluated groups according to their relationship with work. Employers constructed boundaries between immigrant employees and unemployed Finns, as well as between different nationalities. By emphasising work attitude, employers divided people into moral and immoral people, and this division constructed immigrant employees as similar enough in mentality. Thus, employers regarded them as being part of 'us'.

CULTURALLY DISCREET IMMIGRANT EMPLOYEES AS 'US'

We now look at the second frame, in which employers carried out boundary work through workplace rules. In this frame, first of all, the employers spoke much about equality by emphasising that every employee is equal and there is no room for discrimination or racism. By speaking about equality, the employers were trying to remove ethnic boundaries and position all employees on the same line. The idea of 'neutrality' and disappearing ethnicities was justified through equality:

— I've tried to take quite a neutral attitude and, like, a matter-of-fact approach, so that, based on ideas of equality, it makes no difference whether they are from [name of the municipality], Finland, Iraq or Syria. We work here [name of the enterprise] and we try to get people to act according to the enterprise's rules and principles. (Int. 25)

Equality as a value was produced as non-negotiable in that all employees had to accept the equality norm and the workplace's general rules. The employers made clear that all employees who accepted the enterprises' equality norm belonged to the workplace and were part of 'us' in the workplace context. In the following quote, the interviewee excludes employees who have discriminatory attitudes. Based on the idea of equality, the interviewee draws a strict boundary against a Finnish employee who disturbed the egalitarian consensus:

— I have had a word with a couple of people that we have zero tolerance of this [discrimination]. If you are not able to work here because we have, for example, a dark-skinned person working here, it is you who have to leave, not him. (Int. 24)

The employers often described the workplace as a consistent place, where prejudices disappeared when employees learned to know each other. The workplace acted as a place of belonging, where working together erased the boundaries between employees. People who were initially strangers to each other were now constructed as one unit with a common purpose and no special boundaries between them. However, despite emphasising equality, completely erasing boundaries and creating belonging seemed to be a more complex process. On closer examination of our data, we saw the picture of equality, and through this, belonging became more nuanced when some employers started to speak about language and religion. References to language and religion maintained different boundaries between people, and the picture of workplace harmony became more ambiguous.

Language was an element that employers used to create divisions between employees, not only between native Finns and immigrant employees but also between immigrant employees who had different mother tongues. In all the enterprises, proficiency in Finnish was not obligatory for recruitment, but some employers required at least a basic level of Finnish. Many employers described how different languages were spoken in the company's everyday practices. The most common languages used were Finnish and English, but the language repertoire included, for instance, Polish, Estonian and German. Several employers mentioned how the use of different languages or mixing them or even using gesture language was not a problem:

At first it was in a way that the Iraqi didn't speak Finnish but spoke English. But the Burmese didn't speak Finnish or English, so they gestured with each other and developed their own language like this. Now they communicate in Finnish. (Int. 17)

Allowing the use of different languages at the workplace is a sign of blurred boundaries in which bi- or multilingualism has become a normal workplace practice. For instance, using interpreters or allowing English at the workplace enables the recruitment of more immigrants in the enterprises regardless of their Finnish proficiency level. However, when the employers allowed different languages, it simultaneously created a situation in which the lack of one common language caused alienation among the employees. Language prevented belonging because a person who did not understand the workplace's most spoken language(s) was excluded from those who did understand it/them. Despite the fairly wide language repertoire used in the enterprises, the immigrant employees who understood Finnish and English seemed to be in the most advanced position and were considered more part of 'us' because they could participate in the workplace's social interaction. In the next quote, an interviewee constructs the lack of Finnish proficiency as a problem and a reason for an employee's feelings of exclusion:

— with this Italian I felt it was a problem that he couldn't take part in the workplace's social life in the same way as if he had mastered Finnish. And I think that at some point this affected his work motivation. When he couldn't talk with other people, he might have felt an outsider. (Int. 02)

Another element that emerged to disturb the workplace's coherence was religion, even though it was not emphasised as often as language. Nevertheless, some interviewees used religion, especially Islam, as a tool in creating a symbolic boundary. A few employers constructed religion as a problem at a secular workplace if it became too visible. Practising religious rituals 'disturbed work'. Despite the emphasis on equality, this kind of argumentation created a situation of mediocrity in which secular sameness was highly valued. Although Finland can be defined as a secular country, Christian habits are deeply rooted in Finnish institutions. In this context, Islam becomes a considerable 'other' that does not easily fit in with Christian traditions (Alba, 2005; Zolberg & Long, 1999). In the next quote, an employer creates a symbolic boundary through religion. The quote illustrates that belonging is ensured when the employee does not visibly practise religion. Religion was constructed as a potential disturbing factor but belonging was still possible when work held a pre-eminent position. Religion had to be kept private:

— but he has done his job, his religion doesn't disturb his working in any way, and I'm happy with that. He is a really religious fellow, and the only thing I have said is that your religious trinkets don't need to hang around the car, that these are not that kind of buses. You can keep them in your pocket if you want, rosaries and things like that. (Int. 31)

In a few cases, there was a sign of some level of boundary blurring, when practising religion was taken into account or when an employer recognised sensitivity towards different religions. In these cases, religion did not create a division between employees, but was seen as a part of the workplace's diversity and as the employee's personal matter:

I don't mind religion, we have one person who has a prayer mat downstairs. He turns to Mecca and it's his business. Then we have Burmese who are Christians. (Int. 17)

It is noteworthy that even though the emphasis in this frame was on equality, belonging appeared to be difficult to create. For instance, when trying to make space for greater diversity

by enabling the use of different languages at the workplace, this simultaneously created new and sometimes hard boundaries between employees. Workplace rules were presented as equal on the surface, but underneath these rules, the employers created different exclusive dimensions for immigrant employees. These exclusions appeared as demands that immigrant employees should be culturally discreet, which meant that many employers did not want immigrant employees to show distinctive features.

STABLE IMMIGRANT EMPLOYEES AS ‘US’

The employers categorised immigrant employees according to their commitment to a geographical place, to a rural local community or Finland in general. The employers described the immigrant employees who lived in the country permanently in different terms to those who worked in Finland for certain periods. Belonging was seen to be stronger among those immigrant employees who lived in the area permanently. Immigrant employees’ mobile lifestyle was not constructed as a problem, but it was described as immigrants’ longing to be part of their country of origin. In the following quote, the employer creates a distinction between stable and mobile immigrant employees by focusing especially on the motives for work and evaluating the duration of time spent living in Finland. Immigrants going back ‘there’, for one, means that the person is not going to stay ‘here with us’:

— one big group is Estonians and there are in fact two different types. There are those who have come here to work and then stayed for some reason. They might have found a spouse here and started a family or it might be that they have come as a couple and both have found a job here and stayed in Finland. But then the other group is those who come for seasonal work, that is, they come here for six months and after that, they go back to Estonia and stay there for another six months. (Int. 01)

The sense of stability was strengthened by words like ‘here’, ‘house’, ‘family’ and ‘home’. These words worked as elements to draw immigrant employees closer to the boundary line. The employers constructed belonging through one permanent place of residence rather than emphasising multilocality. In many employers’ understanding, moving permanently to Finland was often an act in which immigrant employees crossed the boundary from mobile strangers to settled local community members. Establishing a home indicated stability and thus belonging. Stability was also produced by references to family. If an immigrant employee had brought a spouse and children to Finland, these were signs of seriously settling in Finland. Similarly, in a study of the rural Greek context, locals seemed to be more willing to accept immigrants who lived in the area permanently with their families than immigrants who did not have a regular job or family with them (Kasimis, 2008; Kasimis et al., 2010). The employers themselves lived in Finland and the employees who lived and stayed in the same geographical area were considered more part of ‘our’ lifestyle:

— we have a mechanic from Poland and one driver is from Poland, both of them have brought their families here. One of them just bought a house here. Estonians commute from their homes, but these [Polish] have settled. (Int. 15)

Stability was also supported when employers described how they helped immigrant employees settle in different practical ways. Some employers described how, for instance, they were helping

immigrant employees get an apartment, their own house or a car, and helping them become familiar with Finnish bureaucracy. One interpretation of these descriptions is that by naming certain aspects of the local lifestyle, employers were trying to illustrate elements that they considered part of local belonging.

Intermarriages between native Finns and immigrant employees indicated stability in the employers' speech. Marriage to a Finn was a strong sign of stability and belonging. Some employers stated that the immigrants who married Finns have already integrated into Finland. This kind of statement illustrates that the boundary between natives and immigrant employees became blurred. References to a Finnish spouse constructed immigrant employees as part of Finnish society. From the employers' perspective, long-term decisions in employees' private lives, for example, marriage, created a sense of commitment to the area.

Stability and settling in the area did not automatically mean that there are no boundaries between locals and immigrant employees. Some employers described how immigrant employees' isolation in their own group was an undesirable development. Not having contact with local inhabitants was constructed as a problem and an element that caused alienation of individuals. The idea of negative aspects to residential segregation is similar to what Carlbom (2003) observed: 'when native Swedes and Muslims live separately in the same city, they have no real connection with each other'. In the next quote, an employer explains how, through contacts with native Finns, immigrant employees started to see Finland 'as their own country':

— you get into the Finnish work culture and this way you get more contacts, you are no longer necessarily only with your own community but it becomes wider, and that helps integration, you feel more like you are in your own country, than if you were only among your own community. (Int. 30)

Stability was closely associated with the significance of paying taxes. Taxpaying generally has a deep symbolic value in the Finnish welfare context, and all those who pay taxes are given a strong moral right to live and consume social services because they have funded society by taxpaying. Paying taxes is connected to attributes such as honesty, diligence and decent citizenship. When the employers described immigrant employees together with tax payments, they made a division between taxpaying immigrant employees and those Finns who do not pay taxes. Taxpaying was constructed as a value in itself and a sign of belonging where immigrant employees were illustrated as people who take responsibility for building society together with natives.

— when you get your own money and you realise that you can decide yourself how to use that money and you get by on it, that's a huge thing to these people. There is no better integration. Then they genuinely feel part of this society and of building it, because they surely understand that when tax authorities take something out of your salary, you also get something [for those taxes]. Then they start to understand our school system, public health care and all the other systems we have and for sure that is the best integration. (Int. 25)

In the local community frame, employers seemed to construct a stable lifestyle as a factor that provides wider opportunities for belonging, maybe because safety, familiarity and a sense of mutual understanding create a sense of belonging (Ignatieff, 1995). On the other hand, mobility was constructed as neither a problem nor a threat. This illustrates the ambiguous nature of boundary work: A person can be included in one frame and excluded from another.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main objective of this article was to examine what kind of belonging rural employers create for immigrant employees. We examined the conditions of belonging through discursive boundary work when the employers defined the nature of the boundary between local inhabitants and immigrant employees. We identified three main frames within which the employers did boundary work. Each of these frames had the same kind of tendency: The employers' discourses were an ambiguous mixture of exclusion and inclusion. On the surface, the position of immigrant employees often appeared inclusive, but deeper examination revealed that boundary making was more nuanced and complex. The employers (re)produced different boundaries that constructed different conditions for belonging, and sometimes the frames intertwined or even contradicted each other. When some boundaries were dissipated, others were strengthened.

Our research question was 'in which conditions' was belonging built? We argue that boundaries are on many levels conditional, and immigrant employees were expected to cross boundaries and adapt to working life's general rules and norms. The employers emphasised how hard-working immigrants are part of the workplace and society in general, which resonates with Bauböck's (1994) idea of boundary crossing, in which re-socialisation in the new host country happens on the individual level. Similarly, Zolberg and Long (1999) argue that in boundary crossing, a person moves from one group to another. In our data, the immigrant employees were included because of their labour market position. From the employers' perspective, the boundary that was defined through the hard-working attitude was bright (Alba, 2005), and the division between the included and excluded people was clear. When the employers defined a hard-working attitude as a crucial and welcomed trait that some people and some ethnicities specifically have, they transformed the immigrant employees from outsiders to insiders and simultaneously excluded all those who were constructed as unwilling to work, especially unemployed Finns.

Similarly, the employers described differences between mobile and stable immigrant employees using terms such as having their own house and a family. These elements were associated with the local lifestyle, and the employers used these terms to create differentiation between immigrant groups. These elements build frames for belonging. In addition, the idea for boundary crossing and adaptation was presented in the few discourses about the role of religion at the workplace: The majority of the employers constructed religion as a personal matter, which should be kept invisible in workplace practices. This indicates that belonging requires, at least at some level, accepting the Finnish secular perspective in public life. Emphasising equality as a crucial norm is not surprising in the Finnish context, where the building of equality has a long history. Simultaneously, as emphasising equality, however, employers produced the idea of culturally discreet immigrant employees, not giving much space for religious or cultural variation.

However, even though individual-level boundary crossing was evident in our research, boundary work was not unambiguous. We also found flexibility in the boundaries, when boundaries were challenged by blurring them. A boundary is blurred at the society level if a host society's structures change. This can be seen when, for instance, bilingualism is allowed (Zolberg & Long, 1999). Signs of blurring boundaries and changing practicalities emerged in our data when the employers highlighted different languages and their role at the workplace. A mix of languages was constructed as a normal part of many workplaces' everyday life. Paradoxically, when employers tried to create equal working conditions and allowed the use of different languages during the workday, it was actually described as a problem that maintained different boundaries between

individuals. When boundary work was carried out through language, its use in our data appeared to be a very ambiguous mixture of different boundary construction, in which inclusion and exclusion were intertwined.

As Näre (2014) argues, moral framing is an inevitable part of encounters between immigrants and native Finns. Belonging is constructed in these encounters, which form the basis for who can belong. In our data, the employers constructed immigrant employees as hard-working people by positioning them on a higher moral level than unemployed Finns. Because the sense of belonging is partly experienced through common understanding (Ignatieff, 1995), the employers might have felt that the attitude towards work was familiar or valuable. In our data, immigrant employees' personal qualities, especially what employers called a 'good work attitude', was strongly highlighted. The emphasis on working hard suggests that from the employees' perspective, the individual influences his/her own success and wealth and that these are deserved, not received 'for free' from the welfare state. This is interesting in the context of Finland, where the equal Nordic welfare project has been widely accepted on the national level. With strict definitions of 'good and bad people' or 'desirable and undesirable people', employers can prevent immigrants' belonging if they position them in tight and pre-ordered roles. Work can give economic freedom to immigrants and create personal relationships, which can be significant factors in creating an individual's sense of belonging. On the other hand, emphasis on the individual's efforts excludes those who do not live up to that ideal.

Similarly, power is inherently present in every employer-employee relationship. This can become a hindrance for belonging if employers address only fixed subject positions to immigrant employees. For example, by emphasising 'hard-working attitude', employers can set a predestined frame that is difficult, even impossible, for immigrant employees to change or define in the new terms. When employers describe immigrant employees with a suitable work attitude, there is a danger that immigrant employees will be positioned as 'them' who are eligible only for certain kind of jobs (dirty, low-paid, etc.) Power aspects are particularly highlighted when immigrant employees have limited access to resources. This also weakens the experiences of belonging. This means that notions about 'good worker' are not automatically inclusive (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003).

In our data, belonging changed when it shifted from the workplace to the local community level. This indicates similarities with our starting point in this article, that immigrants can be included in one part of society, for instance, the workplace, and excluded from other parts (Mem-bretti & Lucchini, 2018). In the community's context, natives and immigrants may also have different approaches to local living. Local inhabitants can see immigrants' importance for the local economy and population growth and emphasise the efforts they have made to help integrate immigrants into local communities (Berg-Nordlie, 2018; Søholt et al., 2018). Rye (2018) observed that a rural community's local inhabitants were aware of their dependence on immigrants and immigrants' significance for local development and economy. Simultaneously, however, the immigrant employees developed a multilocal identity by being part of the new host country as well as the country of origin. This way, Rye argues, rural communities change because of increasing labour migration, and communities can become more multilocal as well. Similarly, there might be potential for labour migrants 'to new rural represent a labour class', in which the local community is divided according to inhabitants' work positions (Rye, 2018). All these aspects can be seen in our data when mobile immigrant employees were not constructed as a problem but seen as representing a new lifestyle that included different places, even though their belonging appeared different to that of locally stable immigrant employees. On the other hand, belonging can become

conditional if immigrant employees' belonging is constructed instrumentally through economic arguments.

It should be remembered that our study focused on the workplace context. This means that the immigrants who were the subject of the employers' evaluations were already in the labour market and in this way in a different position, compared to unemployed immigrants. The importance of work on individual and social levels is noticeable in Finnish society, where work is a way to community membership and essential when trying to fulfil the general Finnish norm (Forssander, 2004; Wrede, 2010). Therefore, boundary work might have been appeared differently, if the topic of discussion would have been, for instance, unemployed immigrants. Boundary work can also depend on the context in which the boundaries are constructed: For example, local and regional employment authorities' standpoint differs from that of employers and create different belonging for immigrants. Not only the context affect boundaries but also the length of stay affects how boundaries are settling. It is probable, that longer residency in the new host country and increasing social interaction change boundaries. We interviewed employers who had already employed immigrants, but the picture might have been different if we had interviewed employers who had not employed any immigrants and did not intend to do so. Thus, our data might represent employers who already have a favourable attitude towards immigration. Future research on boundary work would thus benefit from considering those different contexts and preconditions, which would complete the understanding about immigrants' belonging in rural areas.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available on request from the authors. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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